

Richard Hooker (c. 1554 – 1600)

Good evening.

You have some very learned and erudite speakers this evening, but first – I'm afraid – you've got me!

I'm very conscious that fifteen minutes isn't long enough to say all that could be said about Richard Hooker – so, this evening, I hope to just give you a little taster that will, perhaps, encourage or inspire you to read a bit about him for yourself.

Richard Hooker was born in Exeter, around 1554, and died in 1600. He was about 4 years old when Mary 1st died. Queen Elizabeth came to the throne in 1558, so Hooker grew up in the reign of Elizabeth 1st. For those of you whose knowledge of English History is as basic as mine, she was the Queen with ginger hair and a high-pitched voice in *Blackadder* – the second series, I think – with a tendency to say, “Off with his head.” (I think she was played by Miranda Richardson).

Anyway, back to Richard Hooker. Born, as I said, in Exeter, around 1554, Hooker quickly came to the notice of Bishop Jewel in the neighbouring Diocese of Salisbury. (Those of you who came to our first Readers on Writers supper, in the Cathedral, should know all about John Jewel, as Gloria gave us a fascinating and detailed talk about him. For those of you who missed the event at the Cathedral - or the ones at Corbridge and Monkseaton – some of the talks are now available to read on the Newcastle Readers' website).

Anyway, Jewel became patron of the young Hooker and, through Jewel's patronage, Hooker went up to Oxford. He spent some time as a fellow and lecturer at Corpus Christi College – he was assistant professor of Hebrew¹ - and a short period as a parish vicar. Then, in 1585, Hooker was appointed Master of the Temple Church, at the Inns of Court in London. (Again, for those with as unsophisticated tastes as me, I'm pretty sure the Temple Church featured in Dan Brown's novel – and the subsequent film – *The Da Vinci Code*).

¹ <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/hookbio.htm>

I was very impressed - immediately after I wrote that last comment - when I glanced at the scholarly and weighty tome – *Scripture, Tradition and Reason*, by William Marshall - which Peter asked us to read in preparation for these talks, and read, “The circular shape of the Temple clearly showed its origin as a Church of the Knights Templar, a company of soldier monks dedicated to the recovery of the holy places in Jerusalem, but their order had long been suppressed.”² Sounds very *Da Vinci Code*-ish to me!

Anyway, when Hooker became Master of the Temple, the make- up, or demographic, of its congregation had shifted from Knights – or “soldier monks” – to lawyers. (I’m not sure I’d feel terribly comfortable preaching to either – I don’t imagine you’d really want to get on the wrong side of a “soldier monk,” **or** a lawyer!) But Hooker was very fortunate for, when he arrived at the Temple, he found – already on the staff – just what every Vicar needs to aid him – or her – in his ministry ... yup – a Reader.

Unfortunately, Hooker and his Reader – Walter Travers – didn’t always see eye-to-eye. I don’t think they ever sat down and signed one of those Working Agreements, which Readers are supposed to agree with their incumbents today. In fact, there was a rather fundamental **lack** of agreement between Hooker and his Reader. Marshall tells us, “What Hooker preached in the Temple Church at the morning service, Travers would contradict in the afternoon.”³ (If they had a Warden of Readers in those days, I think he would have been kept pretty busy trying to keep the peace between Travers and his incumbent, Hooker!)

So, what was the source of the disagreements between Hooker and Travers? The short answer is that Travers was a puritan, and Hooker a conformist. The puritans disapproved of episcopal government and the Prayer Book. They expected the state to enforce the views of the church’s ministers - whereas Cranmer, Jewel and Hooker believed that the government should have authority over the church. Marshall explains that, “The dispute between Hooker and Travers was essentially about the nature of the Church of England after the Reformation.”⁴

² W Marshall, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason*, page 52

³ W Marshall, *Scripture, Tradition and Reason*, page 53

⁴ Marshall, page 54

After the Archbishop of Canterbury dismissed Travers because of his trouble-making, Hooker **also** left the Temple church. He explained to the Archbishop that – despite his many arguments with Travers – he believed Travers to be a “good man” and he continued:

“... that belief hath occasioned me to examine mine own conscience concerning his opinions; ... and in this examination, I have not only satisfied myself, but have begun a Treatise, in which I intend a justification of the Laws of our Ecclesiastical Polity ...”⁵

So, a disagreement between a Reader and his incumbent led to the writing of one of the most influential works in the Anglican Church! (Maybe that's something Peter could bear in mind! Next time you have to deal with any difficult relationships between a Reader and their incumbent, ask them each to write a book – in eight volumes - outlining and defending their position!)

Hooker's great Treatise was called, *Of the Laws of Ecclesiastical Polity*. The first four books were published in 1593, and the fifth in 1597. The remaining three were published after his death. I'm afraid I haven't read all of them – yet!

Hooker's treatise acquired the status of a classic, in the statement of Anglican belief and outlook. Anniina Jokinen writes that it “represents one of the most distinguished examples of Elizabethan literature.”⁶ And Marshall claims that Hooker is, “probably the single most influential writer among Anglican theologians.”⁷

Hooker was dealing with urgent, practical problems facing the church of his day. He was attempting to win the puritans over, and persuade them to accept the polity and basic structure of the Church of England.

⁵ (Hooker, *Works*, Volume 1 pages 66-7)

⁶ <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/hookbio.htm> Site copyright ©1996-2006 [Anniina Jokinen](#).

⁷ Marshall, page 54

The puritans believed that the reformation hadn't gone far enough. They were extremely anti-Roman, and many puritans wanted to remove everything connected with Rome from the Church of England. They were Calvinistic in their theology of predestination and church government – and they wished the Church of England to imitate the reformed church in Geneva, which they considered to be a pure church, founded on the gospel. They considered the Book of Common Prayer to be full of “popish abominations”, and wanted it abolished - or drastically revised.

Hooker argued for tolerance, and the need to observe the ecclesiastical laws of the land. He realised that no church could satisfy the whole nation on every point of faith and order, but insisted that – for the sake of unity and fellowship – all members of the church should be ready to live together, in one body. (This message is one that, sadly, the Anglican Communion is finding it difficult to abide by today - as the wrangling over women bishops and gay clergy threatens the unity of the church).

Hooker's treatise was very obviously written as a response to the views of the puritans. The first book examines the concept of law, laying the foundation for his argument. The remaining seven books deal with all the issues which the puritans had raised, including the nature of the church, its doctrines and practices.

Hooker believed the law to be the means by which good ends are achieved. Law is inextricably linked to God, who created all things, and created us for relationship with him. Humans can consciously and willingly align ourselves with God and his laws, and it is beneficial for us to do so. Relationship with – and participation in – God is an underlying theme in Hooker's treatise.

Hooker understood that all law proceeds from God. In the first volume of his treatise, he wrote:

“ "Of Law there can be no less acknowledged
 than that her seat is the bosom of God,
 her voice the harmony of the world.
 All things in heaven and earth do her homage,
 — the very least as feeling her care, and the

greatest as not exempted from her power.”⁸

In his book, he divided law into different categories, the first law being God's eternal being and purpose, and other categories including nature's law, celestial law, the law of reason, human law and divine law. He also distinguished between “changeable law” and “essential law.” “Essential law” was absolutely certain and permanent; “changeable law” referred to those laws which Hooker felt were not meant to be universally applicable – including the dietary laws of the Old Testament.

The puritans contended that everything in the life of the church must be explicitly sanctioned by the Bible. Hooker refuted this. He maintained that the scriptures are sacred, and proceeded from God, and contain God's divine law; but that “all things necessary to salvation are known through the Bible **or** the light of nature.” He asserted that,

“Scripture is not the only law whereby God hath opened his will touching all things that may be done.”⁹

Hooker would say that the title of the book which inspired Peter to organise these Reader on Writer suppers is incorrect. He would argue for Scripture, Reason and **then** Tradition. **Scripture** is supreme, as it contains the divine law, the Word of God. It gives us the knowledge necessary for salvation. **Reason** must take second place to the Bible. Reason plays an important role in determining how the state and the church should be ordered – but it is not **infallible**. **Tradition** – the accumulated wisdom and experience of the human race, or of the church – must take **third** place. Tradition is not a source of essential **truth**, but does still have a role to play in the ordering of church life.

I'd like to finish with a quote that Izaak Walton – Hooker's biographer – attributes to King James I:

⁸ Ecclesiastical Polity, Book I, quoted at <http://www.bartleby.com/100/126.html>

⁹ Hooker, Book II ii 2

"I observe there is in Mr Hooker no affected language; but a grave, comprehensive, clear manifestation of reason, and that backed with the authority of the Scriptures, the fathers and schoolmen, and with all law - both sacred and civil."¹⁰

Sorry if I've over ran a bit! If you've got any questions, I suggest you read this excellent book by William Marshall [*Scripture, Tradition and Reason*]- who is far more knowledgeable on the subject of Richard Hooker than I am – ... and Izaak Walton's biography ... and the eight volumes of Hooker's Treatise. And then, if you still haven't found the answer you're looking for, drop me an email and I'll get back to you! Thank you.

¹⁰ Walton, Izaak. "Mr. Richard Hooker." *Lives of the Poets*. London: J. M. Dent, 1898. 75. Quoted at <http://www.luminarium.org/renlit/hookbio.htm>